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ABSTRACT

This newsletter issue reviews the research and literature on issues and best practices in programs to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities to adult life. First, the definition of transition services under the 1997 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is presented and explained. Next, a framework for organizing schools and instruction to facilitate transition is offered based on such principles as student-focused planning and interagency/interdisciplinary collaboration. Guidelines for facilitating student-centered transition planning focus on teaching students needed skills to participate actively in their individualized education program (IEP) planning. Other sections consider finding resources for paid work experiences and improving transition results for students with behavioral disorders. Examples from the field are offered concerning developing self-determination skills and collaboration to enhance transition planning. Specific programs in Oregon--the Oregon Youth Transition Program--and Ohio, which has created a new professional credential--the Transition to Work Endorsement--are described. (DB)

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Research Connections

in Special Education

This Issue

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Planning for transition to adult life has been an integral part of special education services for more than two decades. This issue describes emerging issues in transition, current research, and best practices in the implementation of transition programs.

> *"The transition from school to work and adult life requires sound preparation in the secondary school, adequate support at the point of school leaving, and secure opportunities and services, if needed, in adult situations."*
>
> *Madeline Will, 1984*
> *Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services*

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New Ideas for Planning Transitions to the Adult World

How Research Is Informing Practice

The special education field has come a long way since 1984. Today, transition is seen as more than providing service routes in the individual's movement from high school to employment—it is seen as a comprehensive approach to educational program development consisting of an alignment of student goals with educational experiences and services.

Since the early 1980s, federal law has underscored the need for comprehensive transition planning and broadened its focus. The 1997 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines transition services as a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that:

- Is designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation.
- Is based upon the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests.
- Includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.

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New Ideas for Planning Transitions (continued from page 1)

IDEA also states that transition planning must be part of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and begin at age 14. By age 16, the IEP should contain a statement of needed transition services for the child, including, when appropriate, a statement of interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages. Further, students must be invited to attend their IEP meetings if the purpose of the meeting will be to consider the student's transition service needs.

These new requirements reflect a body of research—much of it supported by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)—that describes what constitutes quality transition programs for students with disabilities. OSEP's investment for over two decades has been key in providing practitioners with a sound basis for planning transition programs. But as practitioners implement models and embrace new requirements, they are finding new issues that must be addressed.

A Framework for Implementing Transition Programs

"The most frequently asked questions about transition planning focus on the what, who, and how of delivering transition-related instruction and services," explains **Paula Kohler**, researcher at Western Michigan University and the Transition Research Institute at the University of Illinois. To answer these questions, Kohler and her colleagues developed a taxonomy of transition practices for students with disabilities. After reviewing the literature, model projects, and exemplary programs, they organized the findings into five categories that are relevant for organizing schools and instruction to facilitate transition. The categories are:

- **Student-focused planning.** The IEP is the planning vehicle for implementing the transition requirements specified in IDEA. Student participation in the process is essential, and self-determination skills are considered to be fundamental for participation. The IEP should include identification of valued and attainable postschool goals.
- **Student development.** Research indicates that work quality, attitude, social skills, and academic skills are related to postschool employment. On-the-job training that includes work-based and school-based learning enhances employment rates.
- **Interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration.** IDEA requires collaboration on both the individual planning and community planning levels. Interagency collaboration focuses on programs, systems, and service delivery. Interagency coordinating bodies should include all stakeholders, including consumers, family members, service providers, and employers.
- **Family involvement.** Research indicates that parents and family members should be involved in transition planning. Because many families are involved in transition activities, practitioners should capitalize on their strengths and abilities.
- **Program structure and attributes.** To implement transition programs that reflect the above categories, schools and programs should be organized accordingly. Educational programs must be based upon postschool goals and a variety of curricular options must be available to students.

For Kohler, the question of who carries out these practices is just as important. "In a national implementation survey, we confirmed that it takes more than a special education teacher or a transition specialist to implement these practices—it takes the entire school community."

According to Kohler, many researchers are concentrating their attention on addressing issues related to how elements of the taxonomy may be implemented.

Beginning on page 3, we'll take a look at how researchers are framing some of the current transition issues and informing practice.

School-to-Life Workshop Materials

Conducting a staff development workshop or teaching a university course on transition? The Council for Exceptional Children distributes the following staff development materials created by **Paula Kohler**, **Jim Martin**, and colleagues:

- *Transition from School to Life: A Workshop Series for Educators and Transition Service Providers.*
- *Transition from School to Life: A Complete Course for Special Educators.*

Promising Approaches in Planning for Transition

As the field moves forward in implementing quality transition programs and services, new issues emerge. Following are examples of OSEP-supported researchers who are helping the field address those issues. In so doing, they are improving transition-to-adult life opportunities for students with disabilities.

Facilitating Student-Centered Transition Planning

"IDEA '97 and its 1999 Regulations greatly strengthen the involvement of students with disabilities in decisions regarding their own futures," points out **Jim Martin**, researcher at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs. According to Martin, students can direct their own IEP process if they have sufficient preparation and support. Martin points out that the flip side also is true. "Typically, students who show up at their IEP meetings without sufficient preparation are unhappy—they generally do not understand the language or the process and they feel other members have not listened to them."

With OSEP support, Martin has studied skills students need to participate actively in their IEPs. These include:

- **How to choose goals.** Provide experiences so students identify their interests, skills, and limits across transition areas.
- **How to participate in and lead their IEP meetings.** Teach students self-determination, self-advocacy, and meeting skills.
- **How to accomplish goals.** Teach students how to develop a plan to attain their goals, take action on the plan, and adjust their plan of action.

Teach Students Needed Skills

Teachers should prepare students to be active participants in the IEP process. Martin developed and field-tested a curriculum series, *Choicemaker Curriculum* (available from Sopris West Publishers, 800-547-6747), to assist practitioners in helping students direct their IEPs.

Wanda Hughes teaches special education at Fountain-Fort Carson High School in Colorado and has been using Martin's curriculum approach for 7 years. Hughes' students participate in their IEPs in various ways depending on their abilities and interests—for example, some students direct their own meeting, while others take a specific part to direct. But in all cases, Hughes asserts, "Students feel good about their participation—they have such a sense of accomplishment...it's empowering for them."

Hughes has learned much over the years about teaching students how to direct their IEPs. Regardless of the curriculum that is used, Hughes recommends that teachers consider the following:

- **Use the curriculum on a regular basis.** It is very easy to put off using the curriculum or to let other subjects take priority. You have to believe that self-determination is a priority!
- **Begin instruction as early as possible.** Self-determination skills can begin in the elementary school.
- **Be prepared to support students with sensitive issues.** Some students may never have seen their IEP and some may not even know what it means. Even if a student knows about IEPs, reading about one's disability can be unsettling. Some students may react by becoming upset or embarrassed. Plan to work through all issues and questions with students. It sometimes helps to talk individually with students in advance of sharing the IEP.
- **Ensure that students understand what their disability means.** It is important that students know about their disability and can talk about it to others. Encourage students to become comfortable stating what they need and what they do not need.
- **Make sure you feel comfortable with the process.** Students will know if you are unsure or uncomfortable talking about a topic or allowing the student to lead the IEP.

Sheila Gritz, facilitator for the state of Florida's Self-Determination Initiative, also has used Martin's curriculum approach with great success. "Before we started using the approach, we questioned whether students could actually lead their own IEPs...but since then I have seen students at all levels participate at different levels and with great success," Gritz asserted.

Gritz had the challenge of helping schools in several districts take necessary steps to move to a student-directed IEP process. Gritz and her colleagues used a state systems change grant to get started. Gritz describes the process, "Our first step was to find interested individuals who would agree to be trained in the approach. We insisted on having an administrator on the team to ensure smooth implementation." Once trained, team

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Approaches in Planning for Transition (continued from page 3)

members assisted colleagues in their own school to make the necessary changes, as well as providing modeling and mentoring to other schools.

After assisting practitioners in several counties to implement the approach, Gritz offers the following recommendations:

- **Teach the skills as a semester course.** Students need sufficient time to master the skills. Although students can be taught skills once a week or in a day-long course, if you really want students to take an active role, you must allow sufficient time.
- **Use motivational techniques to interest students.** Before you begin training, invite an individual with a disability to talk to students. It helps to have role-alike models as speakers (e.g., an individual who is a college graduate, an individual who has gone to a vocational education center, an individual who works in supported employment, a person who owns a business).
- **Communicate with families.** Let parents know your intentions. It helps to invite families to a meeting where you can explain the approach and answer their questions.

Finding Resources for Paid Work Experiences

"Research and experience have taught us that students who are involved in meaningful vocational education and who have the opportunity to work while still in school are more likely to be employed when they transition into the adult world," points out **Michael Norman**, senior researcher with The Study Group. "The challenge is to find resources to fund these opportunities." The Supplemental Security Income Program (SSI), which is administered by the Social Security Administration, may be one option.

With support from OSEP, Norman has been working with colleagues at the University of Minnesota to study how SSI work incentives may be used to enhance employment results of transitioning youth with disabilities. SSI work incentives are designed to increase an individual's overall income while engaging in employment during and after secondary education. SSI work incentives can assist students with disabilities who qualify in:

- Engaging in paid employment.
- Increasing their income without decreasing their SSI benefits or eligibility for other benefits such as Medicaid.
- Offsetting expenses incurred as a result of their work.
- Saving for further post-secondary education and training or starting their own businesses.

"The transition planning component of the IEP provides an opportunity to explore the benefits of the SSI program with students and parents beginning at age 14—or younger, if appropriate," Norman explains. "For students who qualify, accessing SSI work incentives through their local social security office can be an important support for employment and can be incorporated into transition planning."

To benefit from these work incentives, students must be receiving or be eligible to receive SSI cash benefits and be engaged in paid work experiences as part of their transition program.

"It is important for educators to know which of their students are currently receiving SSI benefits so that they can be considered in transition planning," Norman points out. However, Norman also cautions that a number of youngsters are eligible but not receiving SSI. There are many youngsters who are eligible but who are unaware of SSI benefits—but there also a number of students who were ineligible but upon turning 18 became eligible. Norman encourages educators to:

- Identify potentially eligible students who are not participating in the SSI program.
- Alert students who are participating in the program that they will be required to reapply when they turn 18 years old.

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The Study Group, Inc. and National Transition Network produced two publications detailing information on SSI:

- *Meeting the Needs of Youth with Disabilities: Handbook on Supplemental Security Income Work Incentives and Transition Students* (1998).
- *Meeting the Needs of Youth with Disabilities: Examples of Students with Disabilities* (1999).

For copy availability contact the National Transition Network, Institute on Community Integration at: University of Minnesota, 103 U-Tech Center, 1313 Fifth Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 55414, 612-627-4008.

Approaches in Planning for Transition (continued from page 4)

- Inform potentially eligible students and their parents of SSI program benefits.
- Assist students and parents in applying for and maintaining SSI benefits.

Improving Transition Results for Students with Behavioral Disorders

"Research has documented repeatedly that students with emotional disabilities perform more poorly than their disabled and nondisabled peers on nearly every transition outcome," **Michael Bullis,** researcher at the University of Oregon, tells us. "This population of youngsters poses unique and difficult service delivery challenges to schools and social service staffs."

For over 12 years, Bullis has been studying how to change this. His *Job Designs* program, which has received some funding from OSEP, is an example of a model demonstration approach. Participants in the Job Designs program have included youngsters with a variety of characteristics:

- Eligibility for special education services for emotional disturbance.
- Diagnosis with some type of psychiatric label (e.g., conduct disorder, unipolar, bipolar depression).
- Past treatment for substance abuse.
- Attempts at suicide.
- Past record of criminal activity and arrests.

Job Designs is located on the campus of a residential mental health treatment facility. Bullis explains that there is good reason for this. "Because this population of youngsters generally has had poor relations with the school, we wanted to make it easy for them to attend. Further, we wanted to serve the youngsters in a community setting that was not tied to the schedules and rules of a high school. The community-based location afforded us the opportunity to offer intense, quality services."

Job Designs is staffed with a part-time coordinator who oversees daily operations and several transition specialists. Transition specialists are responsible for service delivery, which primarily emphasizes vocational placement and service coordination among community-based social service agencies. "The relationships these staff members maintain with the participants are crucial to the structure and success of the program," Bullis stresses. "These relationships help participants sustain interest and follow through." Job Designs maintains a low staff-to-participant ratio to enhance relationship-building.

A major underlying principle of Job Designs is "zero reject and unconditional care." **Jim Smith** is a vocational rehabilitation counselor affiliated with Job Designs who believes that success is enhanced when staff believe in youngsters and tailor services to their individual needs and abilities. "Rather than simply giving the youngsters a list of jobs to choose, I spend time finding out how the youngster perceives his or her strengths and goals," Smith points out. "What may seem impractical to an adult, may actually be where the youngster's motivation lies." As an example, Smith recounted a story of a young man who had not been successful in the traditional vocational programs. "He finally told me he wanted to be a model for an ad agency—not a particularly practical goal," Smith said. However, Smith helped him secure a job as a model. "He followed through and kept his job. While he didn't make a lot of money, I have to ask, 'What's the alternative?'"

> *"Much of Job Design's Success had to do with collaboration across the program staff, service providers, and employers. Collaboration takes a lot of time—most of it unbillable—so it is important to believe in its ultimate value to the client."*
>
> *Marion Gregor, Therapist*

Overall, results of the program are promising. Consider the following findings for 79 youngsters in the program during 1992-1995:

- While in the program, 71% of youngsters were placed in one or more competitive jobs, for a total of 79 different placements. Only 18 of these placements (23%) ended with the participant being fired and 29 (37%) ended with the participant quitting.
- On average, participants were paid between $.25 and $.50 above minimum wage and worked roughly 20 hours weekly.

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Views From the Field

The following perspectives show how transition planning may be enhanced.

Self-Determination

Self-determination is broadly defined as the ability of individuals to control their lives, to achieve self-defined goals, and to participate fully in society. "Self-determination instruction during the elementary, middle, and secondary transition years prepares all students for a more satisfying and fulfilling adult life," explains **Michael Ward** at the Center on Self-Determination at Oregon Health Sciences University. "Our focus is to promote the sharing, development, and application of knowledge on the expression of self-determination by individuals, families, and communities."

One of the Center's activities is coordinating the Alliance for Self-Determination, a national partnership of organizations representing a broad range of efforts and constituencies. The Alliance grew out of an OSEP project but now is supported by Alliance members. The Alliance aims to build and support leadership among researchers, policy makers, advocates, and funders. According to Ward, the Alliance has four principles:

- Self-determination is essential to personal freedom, citizenship, self-sufficiency, and full participation in family and society.
- Access to information, the physical environment, employment, and other typical life opportunities are critical to the expression of self-determination.
- Self-determination should be promoted across the life span within the culture and ethnicity of the individual, family, and community.
- Implementation of self-determination practices requires society to support the capacities of all individuals to speak and care for themselves.

The Center for Self-Determination also carries out other projects. For example, with OSEP support, **Laurie Powers**, researcher and program developer at the Center, has been studying an outreach model to promote transition planning involvement of youth with disabilities from diverse backgrounds. Components of the model include:

- Coaching youth in self-direction skills.
- Building the capacity of families to assist their sons and daughters in self-determination and transition planning.
- Offering individual and group mentorship activities.
- Providing information and support to school staff.

Collaboration Enhances Transition Planning

"In the 1990s, a number of OSEP-funded transition grants demonstrated coordination with relevant agencies, organizations, and state systems transitions projects," **Ginger Blalock**, Director of the Division of Education Specialties at the University of New Mexico, reports. "State-level transition teams can greatly enhance individual student team efforts."

For twelve years, Blalock has been involved with the New Mexico Statewide Transition Coordinating Council (NMSTCC)—a state-level transition team focused on creating an infrastructure for communities to develop and improve transition services. "These councils are designed to open doors for interagency collaboration at the state level that is intended to enhance cooperation at the local level," Blalock explains.

During the first year, Council members studied rural and urban demonstration sites, and disseminated the information to local stakeholders in regional workshops during the second year. With the help of an OSEP grant in the third year, Blalock began looking at how to help higher education develop high quality transition training. As part of a state systems change grant in the fourth year, Blalock was tapped to help local education agencies with transition programming. Part of that work resulted in a Council-planned summer institute which responds to priority needs in transition. Although the grant is over, the state continues to fund the summer institute.

Blalock's experience has taught her that transition can be enhanced when all stakeholders—higher education, adult agencies, school districts, families, and youth—are involved at all levels. "The Council has made important state-level contributions to improving transition services in New Mexico."

> *"The NMSTCC is a perfect demonstration of how shared leadership, shared resources, shared commitment, and dedication ensure the successful transition of students with disabilities into an adult world."*
>
> *Carol Brito*
> *Transition Coordinator*
> *New Mexico State Department of Education*

State and Regional Perspectives

States can play an important role in promoting quality transition services. Following are examples of how states are responding to needs in the field.

Partnership in Oregon

The Oregon Youth Transition Program (YTP) is a comprehensive, statewide initiative geared toward improving the post-school and life successes of its participants. YTP is overseen at the state level, but implemented and operated at the district level. YTP services include:

- Individualized planning focused on post-school goals, self-determination, and coordination with relevant community agencies.
- Instruction in academic, vocational, independent living, and personal-social skills; help to stay in school and obtain a completion document.
- Paid job training while in the program and assistance to secure employment or enter postsecondary education upon leaving the program.
- Follow-up support for 2 years after leaving the program.

Michael Benz, researcher at the University of Oregon, has been involved with YTP and its development since the early 1980s. "The idea for YTP started with a 1983 statewide survey which suggested, among other things, the need for a community transition team model in partnership with the state." From there, Benz worked on a state systems change grant. "By the late eighties we began seeing the need to build a service delivery system in transition that connected all adult agencies with schools and communities." With OSEP support, Benz launched a model demonstration project to do just that.

According to **Tim Latta**, Coordinator for School Transition Services in Oregon's Vocational Rehabilitation Division, the partnership with the state has proven successful for districts. "The support we provide allows districts to hire a person to serve a small number of students, which for many administrators is a hard decision to make" Latta said. "But it also allows them to see the kind of positive results that come with YTP."

> *"While I was on staff in the Special Education Section of the Arizona Department of Education, we adapted the Oregon Youth Transition Program to fit unique needs in Arizona. We attribute much of our success in implementing the approach in Arizona to the fact that YTP is thoughtful, intact, and field-tested."*
>
> *Laura Love*
> *Arizona State University*

Since its inception in 1990, the program has served several thousand students in over 75% of Oregon's high schools with the following results:

- Of youth in the YTP, 67% obtain a regular high school diploma compared to 43% of youth with disabilities nationally. (The graduation rate for students without disabilities is 75%.)
- Of YTP students, 70% are competitively employed during the first 2 years after leaving school compared to 46% of youth with disabilities nationally. (The employment rate for YTP students is the same as the competitive employment rate for students without disabilities.)

Ohio Creates Transition to Work Endorsement

Some states have addressed the need for a transition specialist by creating special, licensed positions. The State of Ohio took a different approach when they created the *Transition to Work Endorsement.*

"As part of a state systems change grant, we studied the need for qualified professionals who could serve as transition specialists and determined that creating a new position on top of what we already had was not a viable option," reports **Lawrence Dennis** who is a project director in the Division of Special Education, State of Ohio Department of Education. "We decided to provide a process for professionals in the state to retool their skills and knowledge."

To qualify for the Transition to Work Endorsement, candidates must demonstrate competencies that reflect effective district-based transition programs. "We based the endorsement competencies on those espoused for transition specialists in the book, *What Every Special Educator Must Know: The International Standards for the Preparation and Licensure of Special Educators* (The Council for Exceptional Children, 1998).

"We especially hope that all future special education teachers will view the endorsement as enhancing their marketability and complete it as part of their undergraduate training," Dennis stated.

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Contacts

Michael Benz
175 College of Education
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403
541-346-1408
mbenz@oregon.uoregon.edu

Ginger Blalock
College of Education
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131
505-277-5119
blalock@unm.edu

Mike Bullis
175 College of Education
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403
541-346-1645
mbullis@oregon.uoregon.edu

Lawrence Dennis
Division of Special Education
Ohio State Department of Education
933 High Street
Worthington, OH 43085
614-466-2650

Paula Kohler
Department of Educational Studies
Western Michigan University
3506 Sangren Hall
Kalamazoo, MI 49008
616-387-5955
paula.kohler@wmich.edu

Jim Martin
School of Education
University of Colorado
1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway
Colorado Springs, CO 80918
719-262-4167
jmartin@mail.uccs.edu

Michael Norman
The Study Group, Inc.
209 Sir Walter Raleigh Dr.
Kill Devil Hills, NC 27948
252-441-2788

Laurie Powers
Michael Ward
Center on Self-Determination
Oregon Health Sciences University
3608 SE Powell Blvd.
Portland, OR 97202
503-232-9154
http://www.ohsu.edu/selfdetermination

Web Sites Related to Transition

- *National Transition Alliance for Youth with Disabilities* **http://www.dssc.org/nta**
- *National Transition Network* **http://www.ici.coled.umn.edu/ntn**
- *Transition Research Institute* **http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/SPED/tri/institute.html**
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Jane Burnette, *Publications Manager, ERIC/OSEP Special Project*

Raymond Orkwis, *Production Coordinator, ERIC/OSEP Special Project*

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ERIC/OSEP Special Project
The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Dr.
Reston, VA 20191-1589
(703)620-3660 TTY (703)264-9449
(800)328-0272 http://ericec.org

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